



Talking With Your Preteen about Sexuality

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Preteen children continue to define their values, beliefs and knowledge about sexuality.

- Giving accurate facts and openly discussing their questions and concerns can help teens and preteens develop healthy and responsible sexual attitudes.
- While conversations may not always feel the most “comfortable”, being a safe and trustworthy figure for your teen to talk about their sexuality may foster healthier sexual behaviors.

Preteens are curious about sexuality.

- They want to know about everything — what, when, where, how, and why. Encourage your children to come to you for accurate information rather than relying on friends, peers, or the media.
- Beyond just the facts, preteens also may need help navigating their feelings and emotions around sexuality. Being open, honest, and nonjudgmental to your preteens questions or concerns about sexuality will help them to feel comfortable coming to you with more questions in the future.

Understanding Your Young Adolescents’ Concerns

Preteens and young teens often are:

- **Concerned about their own bodies** — how their body works and how it compares with their friends.
- **Busy with social development.** This is a time of becoming increasingly independent from parents and more

sensitive to peers. Preteens are concerned with how they fit in with their friends and what their peers think of them.

- **Becoming aware of and interested in sexual relationships.**
- **Concerned with, "Am I normal"?** The wide range of physical development among peers increases this concern.
- **Developing interest in the importance of physical appearance and personal grooming.**
- **Interested in sexual anatomy, sexual vocabulary and sexual behavior.** This might present as crude jokes; “bathroom talk”
- **It’s OK to be uncomfortable.** As mentioned above, talking about sexuality with your child can feel uncomfortable. The more that you practice and engage in open conversations with your preteen will slowly ease that uncomfortability. It is also okay to encourage your preteen to have healthy conversations about their sexuality with their friends and peers.

When should I start talking with my child about their sexuality, sex, and romantic relationships?

As a parent/caregiver, you probably have probably debated when the right time is, if ever, to talk about sexuality with your child. Research tells us that adolescents who engage in regular conversations with their parents (or caregivers) about sex and romantic relationships, the less likely they are to partake in risky, sexual behaviors. So, it is never too early to

facilitate healthy and age-appropriate conversation with your child about sexuality.

Into adolescent years, it may be important for parents/caregivers to sit down with their child to have a conversation about sexuality, if they haven't done so already. As teens are experiencing an array of physical, emotional, and hormonal changes, taking the time to create a healthy foundation around your sexuality with your teen will support future conversations with your child. Focus these conversations on exploring your teen's sexual interests/preferences and support them in having healthy conversations about sex, consent, and setting boundaries with others.

Credit: <https://www.plannedparenthood.org/learn/parents/tips-talking>

How do I start a conversation about sexuality with my child?

Rest assured, there is no right or wrong way to start a conversation about sexuality with your child. One strategy or approach for facilitating a conversation about sexuality with your teen may work for one parent, but not for another. It is important to know your child and what makes them feel the most comfortable.

Talking with your child about sex, relationships, and their sexuality is a lifelong conversation. Sometimes, these conversations may require you and your teen to sit down in a private environment where other conversations may arise randomly. Having regular conversations with your teenager about sexuality reiterates the importance of this topic. It also helps to normalize the subject with your adolescent!

Try “handing the mic” to your teen by asking them questions about their sexuality. It is most important for you to:

- **Be clear with your teenager that they can come to you with any questions or concerns they have about their sexuality or sexuality in general.**

- **Normalize and validate what your teen is going through, including their feelings and emotions.**
- **Offer support without fear of shame or judgement.**
- **Know your facts!**
 - Teens having sex before the age of 15 years old are more likely than other teens to:
 - Have unprotected sex.
 - Have many sexual partners.
 - Be intoxicated while having consent.
 - Getting sexually transmitted diseases.
 - Teen pregnancy.
 - Because teens are just learning about emotional intimacy, young teens are more likely to have sex with someone they do not know well than with a relationship partner.
 - Teens are also not always familiar with the importance of setting sexual boundaries with partner(s) and obtaining verbal, sober consent.

How can parents/caregivers help?

- **Use the media to springboard discussion with your teen.** This may be an easy way to start discussing sexuality with your teen, especially if it involves television characters. Consider asking your adolescent, “*what they thought of that movie scene?*”, or “*how does hearing that song lyric make you feel?*”

While the media may not always be the best representation of sex, relationships, or sexuality, it may provide an opportunity for further discussion. Also, the media is a great way to “speak your teens” language.

- **First, listen to your child’s questions. Then, reassure them.** Consider responding, “I’m glad you asked. What are your thoughts on _____?” This will help you to discover what your teen already knows, allowing you to correct any inaccurate information. Also, it opens your eyes to your teen’s perspective about their question before providing them with your response.
- **Don’t always wait for your child to ask first.** Allowing your teen the opportunity and space to come to you is important. However, look for ways to initiate a discussion or invite a question without overwhelming or pressuring them. Sometimes your teen just needs a little push!
- **Be prepared to discuss topics more than once and to maybe disagree.** Teens are constantly exploring their sexuality and comparing differences between their friends/peers and family. At times, you and your teen may have differing opinions and that is okay.
- **Don’t be afraid to talk about your teen years.** Sharing about your past relationships, previous conversations with others or that others had with you, or offering how you navigated your teen years, specifically sexuality, will help your teen to remember that you were once a teenager too.
- **It is okay to admit that this is uncomfortable and new for you too.** As a parent/caregiver, sometimes taking ownership of your own emotions is important for your teen to see. Sharing in

the uncomfortability with them will make them feel better about feeling the same way themselves. It is okay to admit to your teen that “I don’t know”, or “this is new for me too”.

What does your preteen/teen need to know?

Preteens and young teens need to know what to expect during puberty.

- Both boys and girls need information about how both sexes develop and the timing of these changes.

They need reassurance that they are normal — that young people develop at different times and rates.

Young adolescents need to know about reproduction.

- They are interested in how pregnancy occurs, the birth process, twins, and many other topics.

Both girls and boys need to know about major changes they will experience menstruation and nocturnal emissions (or wet dreams).

- Girls may be curious about what to expect during menstruation, and how menstruation relates to pregnancy. Boys need reassurance that wet dreams are normal.

Many children are concerned about masturbation.

- You may want to explain that some children masturbate, and some do not. This is a personal choice, but masturbation is not harmful to your health.

Your child needs to know about AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).

- Although children are learning about AIDS and STDs in school, parents have a very important job in helping their children really understand AIDS and STDs and how serious they are. One of the most important things you can do is to *make your values about sex clear to your children*.

Education is our most important weapon in the battle against AIDS, STDs, and unintended teen pregnancies.

- You can do your part by helping your children shape their values.

Most important of all —

- Your child needs to know that he or she is valued and can come to you for information and to talk about all of his/her concerns and feelings.

Additional References:

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References

Planned Parenthood. (n.d.). *Tips for Talking to your kids about sex and sexual relationships*. Planned Parenthood Federation of America Inc. <https://www.plannedparenthood.org/learn/parents/tips-talking>

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